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ABSTRACT

Students and teachers need to discuss and understand what kind of role each expects the other to assume at various points in the writing process. In other words, teachers should make their strategies and goals for responding explicit, and should give students the opportunity to explain their perspectives and their reactions. Even if they cannot agree, the discussion itself should prove valuable. This type of discussion is imperative because not only do students have widely different ideas about the role of a writing instructor but instructors themselves have widely different ideas about their role. Descriptions of the approach of two instructors at the same institution makes this point clear. The first instructor prides himself on the time he spends correcting student papers. He requires some kind of writing in every class, and he always returns the papers by the next class meeting--with every error marked. He deducts a fraction of a letter grade for every error; no paper can be rewritten. The second instructor engages his students individually. When he reads an essay, he points out one or two areas that need revision, gives a tentative grade, then returns the essay to the student. Students can revise as many times as necessary to bring the grade up to a passing standard. Despite their differences, both professors are successful and highly appreciated by their students. (Three figures offer teacher and student views.) (TB)

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ED 381 804

Student and Teacher Roles and Expectations as Sources of Potential Conflict in the Classroom

Let me tell you about two of my colleagues who teach first-year-composition, both of whom are very good at what they do, and both of whom are well-liked by their students, but who preside over extremely different kinds of classrooms. One prides himself on the time he spends correcting student papers. He requires some kind of writing in every class, and he always returns the papers by the next class meeting--with every error marked. He deducts a fraction of a letter grade for every error, so that even a one-page paper could, with enough errors, get a grade of F-quintuple-minus. In this model, students write frequently for an expert reader. They identify the kinds of errors they commit, then--at least in theory--eliminate those errors in future papers. Though students may correct their errors to remove point deductions, revision is not an option; students learn to "get it right the first time."

In addition, this professor reads selected papers aloud in class, and has several class members critique each paper. Standards are clear, and students quickly learn to reach agreement about the score for each paper (before deductions for errors). Each writer thus hears several peers critique each work, and each student has numerous opportunities to evaluate other students' work in the presence of other writers. Students thus become proficient as critics, which in turn helps them become proficient as writers.

Sounds horrible, right? The fact is, students who don't like this format tend to discover their mistake quickly and drop the course early in the semester. Those who stay, however, seem to love it. They know exactly what is expected of them and exactly how to do well. They learn to perform the exercise of critiquing an essay with such skill that their evaluations match those of an expert--the professor. They learn to perform difficult tasks, and they learn to perform them well. The professor

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is the expert, the students are the apprentices, and everybody in class knows which is which. Roles are clear, expectations are clear, and everyone involved seems happy with the situation.

The professor right across the hall teaches an entirely different kind of composition class. He uses a strictly one-to-one approach: his students spend almost the whole class period writing, and he engages them individually in discussion about their work in progress. When he reads an essay, he points out one or two areas that need revision, gives a tentative grade, then returns the essay to the student. Students can revise each essay as many times as necessary to bring it up to a "passing" standard, but they must complete five "passing" essays to pass the course. Individual essay grades are played down in this course, in part because everything is open to revision, and in part because this professor teaches classes made up almost entirely of students who failed the course at least once before and are simply trying to pass this time around. Both the students and the professor tend to view the students as in need of help, and to view the professor as someone trying to help them "get through" the course.

Does this course sound any more palatable? How would you do as a student in either of these courses? Not surprisingly, neither of the professors I just described can imagine being a student in the other's class. I also suspect that each privately questions the wisdom of the other's pedagogy. Nevertheless, both professors seem to work well with the particular groups of students who tend to migrate toward their respective classes. In other words, both classes seem to "work."

What makes these drastically different classes work, I think, is a match between student and teacher expectations about what should happen in the classroom. What it <u>is</u> that should happen, of course, is open to debate. A recent issue of *College English* reopened an old debate between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae about what teachers should be doing in first-year composition classes. As long as Peter's students recognize that he's more interested in helping them become writers than having them become academics, and David's students realize

that he's teaching them to function as members of the academy, then classes should function smoothly. Should one of David's students transfer to Peter's class, however, or vice versa, I suspect there would be trouble.

What I want to discuss here, though, is not what teachers think should happen, but what students think will happen when a teacher starts writing on a student paper. To help me find out what students thought happened, I asked two classes of first-year composition students--all college-bound high school seniors taking a college class a semester early--what roles they thought teachers should or did assume when responding to student work. Here are some typical answers:

1. A teacher's role in writing feedback to her students is primarily to tell the student what they did wrong and how to fix it. Very rarely do teachers read things for pleasure to just see if they like the content. Some concentrate on grammar mistakes more than anything. I had a teacher who you could write anything down even if it didn't have anything to do with the right subject. Just as long as you spelled everything right and there weren't any grammatical errors.

2. I believe that the role of a teacher is to comment on the student's writing. . . . I do not, however, think that the teacher should say exactly what is wrong, and then correct it for the student. This process does not allow the student to learn from his or her mistakes.

3. The role of a teacher should be a guiding one. First, they should help the student by advising the student. The teacher should give the student a few choices when it comes to corrections and let the student decide.

4. I . . . think that a teacher should not judge the quality of the essay but how much effort they felt the student put in to their paper.

Figure 1 lists these various expectations students might have when they walk into the classroom. I've added a fifth category, "Confuse students," because it seems to summarize what many students seem to think we're up to. In fact, teachers don't make the situation any easier. We probably have a wider variety of expectations about our roles than students do.

The most common roles for teachers, at least as we discuss them among ourselves, seem to fall into opposing pairs: friend or foe, ally or gatekeeper, coach or evaluator. These roles typically cast the teacher as working either with or against the student. But there are plenty of other roles as well.

In one popular volume on responding to student work, Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff suggest that we can be Rogerian-style counselors, using active listening skills to "say back" to students what they have said to us; or that we can be analysts, finding "centers of gravity" that students don't recognize, or pointing to "what's almost said" (but not quite); or that we can be reflective movie-goers, providing students with "movies of our minds" to illustrate the ways one reader might react to the writing. Brooke Horvath's "Practical Synthesis of Current Views" notes that teachers can also be questioners, advisors, assigners, reconceptualizers, diagnosticians, editors, adversaries, or cheerleaders, to name a few—and Horvath's "current" synthesis is now over ten years old. In the intervening decade, we've identified even more roles for teachers to play, and suggested that they play many of them, depending on the situation. It's no wonder students complain that teachers are inconsistent or even schizophrenic—we are. I've listed these options--in a slightly different order for aesthetic purposes--in Figure 2, and again I've added my own category ("Go crazy") to summarize the list.

We know what happens when students fail to meet our expectations, but what happens when we fail to meet student expectations? That is, what happens when the role we assume is not the role students expect or want?

Beth Daniell and Art Young tell the story of one student who, upon being asked to respond to Art's commentary on the student's essay, wrote the following:

> **I don't know what I am supposed to be writing to you. I read your critique and I think I disagree with 95% of them. It seems to me you want us to be robots and make the same argument. I can care less whether I'm right or wrong for two reasons. One I don't care about this topic. There is no relevence to real life. I came to college to learn about finance not English, History, and Biology. Yet I've spend my money taking an entire year of these bullshit courses. That money comes out of my pocket and I shouldn't have to pay an entire year's tuition for useless info that I learned in high school. Secondly, I got plenty of other classes and don't have 3 or 4 hours a night wasting time on this. Give me a damn D or F I don't care, and neither will my employer who's already offered me a job. This is my essay, and [I'm] not going to do anymore than I have to. If you don't like it then give me a bad grade. If you don't like this response, well tough luck! (224)**

Granted, this student was probably reacting to far more than just unmet expectations, but his reactions might be similar to those of other students who simply don't voice them quite so directly. In this particular case, Art told me that he confronted the student, and they worked out an agreement to disagree--but at least each understood the other's perspective. I wonder what happens with those students who don't alert us to such problems, but choose instead to keep their views to themselves and write us off as out of touch, out of ideas, or maybe out of our minds.

On the other hand, I'm not sure it's always beneficial for the teacher to meet student expectations. If students expect little, and teachers oblige, is that necessarily good? Consider what happens, for example, when both the student and the teacher put the teacher strictly in the role of copy editor. This might well be the role many students would like for us to assume, since they so often say, "Just tell me what's wrong, and I'll fix it." It a role many of us probably claim we avoid, but I suspect it's

also a role many of us embrace as a sacred duty: we *must* show students *every* error they make, because if we don't, they'll keep committing those errors.

I suppose I should point out how little the students learn, or at least how little their writing skills improve, when teachers simply edit and students simply make corrections. But the reality is that many students (and apparently many teachers) are quite happy with this model. Though students and teachers alike complain about the amount of work required, each knows exactly what is expected and exactly what to do. Perhaps that's why so many students and so many teachers embrace this model, which I've described in Figure 3.

Consider another scenario: the student expects the teacher to edit, but the teacher chooses to point out strong and weak points with respect to logic and development, expecting the student to make choices about how to improve the writing. (Of course, this scenario assumes that the student has at least the option, if not the requirement, to revise.) The student becomes frustrated because the teacher refuses to take a stand on the "best" way to "fix" the essay, and the teacher becomes frustrated because the student refuses to accept responsibility for the writing.

Here's a third scenario: the student expects the teacher to point out "trouble spots" in the writing and offer some guidelines to help overcome those difficulties. The teacher, having been warned of the dangers of appropriating student texts, decides to avoid temptation by asking only open-ended questions that require the student to think deeply about the goals of the writing and the various strategies available to help reach those goals. Again, both parties are likely to be frustrated: the student, because the teacher keeps asking questions about a text not on the page; the teacher, because the student is reluctant to engage in adequate reflection.

In this final scenario, both the student and the teacher have reasonable expectations: they both want to use the teacher's expertise to help the student see options for revision, but the student wants to get help and the sentence and paragraph level, while the teacher wants to give help at a global level. Unless the two come to an understanding about what kind of help the teacher is going to

provide and when, little useful activity is likely to occur.

And that is my main point: that **students and teachers need to discuss and understand what kind of role each expects the other to assume at various points in the writing process.** In other words, teachers should make their strategies and goals for responding explicit, and should give students the opportunity to explain their perspectives and their reactions. Even if they can't agree, as was the case with Art and his student, the discussion itself should prove valuable, and it should diffuse potential conflict.

In my own classroom, I try to explain to students how I read their papers: that I read first drafts in a different way than second or third drafts, and that I tend to respond to different aspects of early drafts and later drafts. I think it's also important to let students voice their concerns about what I do with their papers, since they often know specific needs they have, and I might provide more help by attending to those specific needs than by attending to my predetermined goals for responding. To be effective, the discussion must work both ways: I want students to understand and go along with what I'm trying to accomplish, but I also want to be open to helping them accomplish their own goals as well. It doesn't always work that neatly, of course, but at least we're not butting heads in the dark. I *think* it makes my teaching more effective; I *know* it makes my work more enjoyable.

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What Teachers Do (Student Views):

- Identify errors
- Make "comments"
- Offer choices
- Judge effort
- Confuse students

Figure 1

WHAT TEACHERS DO (TEACHER VIEWS):

Diagnose problems

Make assignments

React subjectively

Reconceptualize

Ask questions

Give advice

Paraphrase

Analyze

Edit

GO CRAZY...

Figure 2

Three Scenarios

S view:	T view:	RESULT
Teacher edits; student makes corrections; process ends	Teacher edits; student makes corrections; process ends	MATCH
Teacher edits; student makes corrections; process ends	Teacher offers suggestions; student makes choices and revises	CONFLICT
Teacher offers suggestions; student makes choices and revises; teacher evaluates	Teacher asks questions; student reflects on goals and strategies, then revises	CONFLICT

Figure 3